

Theme 1: Negotiating the researcher role in out-of-school learning research

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Proponents of robust research design and methodology (particularly, although not exclusively, in more positivist-leaning epistemology) have often suggested that the role of the researcher should be as invisible, or distanced, as possible in the research process. Many of the case studies presented in this book take a more qualitative, interpretative approach, reflecting the often complex, situated, local and dynamic contexts in which out-of-school learning occurs. This raises particular challenges relating to the researcher role, especially when the researcher's presence materially changes the context and phenomena that are being researched. Some of the case studies describe the tensions and affordances of the researcher as insider/outsider and demonstrate how this role can develop and change as a project progresses, and the implications this has for research practice, research quality, and research governance.

Keywords: reflexivity; positionality; insider/outsider; relational; reciprocity; ethics; activism

Introduction

At the heart of this discussion are questions about reflexivity. Reflexivity is a hugely important concept in qualitative research and stems from the fact that our intention, as qualitative researchers, is not to uncover objective facts but to produce a subjective interpretation of some phenomenon. Such subjectivity is necessarily open to influence from a researcher's particular theoretical dispositions, biases and preferences. Reflexivity is the means by which the researcher acknowledges these potential dispositions, biases and preferences, and considers how these might have affected the findings of the research.

The case studies provide some specific considerations for researchers investigating out-of-school learning to take account of in terms of reflexivity, and some of them raise questions about how this might best be done. Out-of-school learning can be seen as a special case in this respect, as studies often involve complex, and potentially unfamiliar, contexts with multiple actors, that often change as the research project progresses. They also focus on relatively open research questions that allow for developments and changes in their focus as a project progresses.

In this chapter we focus on two main questions:

What can be learned about the role of the researcher from the case studies in respect of reflexivity and flexibility in the face of changing contexts?

What do the case studies tell us about the considerations for researchers in positioning themselves in different ways in the research process?

Researcher as Insider/Outsider

Traditionally, qualitative researchers have been considered to operate as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' with respect to the phenomena that they are investigating. Insiders are in some way a member of the same group as the participants whose lives or behaviours are being investigated, or are otherwise very familiar with the context and setting. This insider status brings advantages including access to and rapport with participants, but may also lead the researcher to overlook phenomena seen as mundane or routine to members of the group, or to experience bias towards more positive interpretations of group responses and behaviours. Outsiders are not so intimately familiar with the context, setting, and participants that they are investigating. Outsider researchers may require more time and effort to gain the trust of their participants, but may be seen as more objective and may be more likely to notice the more mundane aspects of participants responses or behaviours. Kerstetter (2012) however notes that researchers have, on the whole, moved past thinking about their status in terms of an insider v. outsider dichotomy, and rather consider most researchers to occupy the 'space between' these poles. She also draws attention to the fact that, "researchers' positionalities are relational and dynamic" (p.101) and as such constantly shift as researchers come to know the context and the people they are working with. We can identify some examples from the case studies where researchers are quite visibly occupying this space between insider and outsider.

In Case Study 2 – Youth Sports Programmes, Costas Batlle and Brown clearly recognise that their own values and beliefs were deeply connected with their analysis of ways in which neoliberal discourse can inhabit citizenship education. As such, they occupied a critical, outsider, position with respect to the focus of their study. On the other hand they also, over time, developed an insider perspective that helped gain access to, and to engage in, richer and more nuanced interactions with their participants groups. Their account of wearing one of the coaches' t-shirts, and the way in which this immediately conferred some degree of insider status, illustrates the way in which a simple insider/outsider dichotomy is not an adequate model of the situation. Costas Batlle and Brown go further in problematising the dichotomy where they reflect on the difference between their 'front-stage performance', constituting "the curious, affable, and probing parts of the researcher", and the 'back-stage' "analytical, critical, and value-drive" parts.

Similarly, Judge and Blazek, in Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work, describe quite explicitly some ways in which they came to occupy insider/outsider positions. They consider some quite uncomfortable situations when their outsider position was highlighted by youth participants; Blazek's participants describing themselves as his 'laboratory mice' appears to represent a form of resistance to being researched by an outsider. Both researchers took steps to approach insider status in order to become closer to the context and participants they were researching.

Based on the case studies in this book, it is evident that researchers interested in out-of-school learning must tread a fine line between insider and outsider status. In many cases, the researchers can never be true insiders – where adult researchers are researching youth participants, for example. However, the case studies often show that without some efforts to work towards insider status, it can be difficult to gain sufficient trust and rapport to learn from participants.

Researcher as reflexive and relational

In Case Study 1 - Out-of-School Activities and Attainment, Laing, Mazzoli Smith and Todd describe how crossing ontological paradigms in investigating out of school learning is difficult, and an emphasis on pragmatism does not always help. Our own positioning as researchers in relation to children and young people leads us to behave in certain ways and to value particular standpoints. Reflexivity in the process of research thus becomes paramount, and can guide and change the way the research develops. For example in Case Study 2 – Youth Sports Programmes, Batlle and Brown are careful

to stress that they see young people from an asset-based perspective, and were upfront with them about their values. This meant that their ethics of care and reflection upon their own priorities (e.g. the language they used), enabled them to boundary-cross, and prevented them from slipping into the professional 'default' position of protecting their own priorities. The example given in Case Study 4 – Minecraft Club, by Bailey, also stressed how conventional methods could not capture the full extent of what was being studied, and the researcher had to recognise this and be flexible about adapting conventional methodology to the context in which they were working. Here, Bailey was able to recognise the value of multimodal communication, and put aside his professional academic sense of the primacy of the written word. This allowed the adoption of multiple modes of meaning making that was necessary to represent the multi-spatial context in which he was working. The primacy of the written word was also challenged in Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work (Cheung Judge & Blazek), such that the researcher needed to stop note taking. As researchers, we concern ourselves with the outward-oriented production of knowledge (in our research papers), but the knowledge production described in many of these chapters, as Cheung Judge and Blazek outline, is also interpersonal and personal. The researcher needs to be prepared to learn, not just about others, but about themselves and how to 'be' with others. This sense of relational agency was pivotal to the study described in Case Study 7 – Parents' Everyday Maths (Rose and Jay), which stressed the importance of understanding others' perspectives, and reflecting on and identifying 'common knowledge'.

A common thread through many of the chapters, with respect to reflexivity and relationality, was an ongoing assessment of positionality with respect to participants. The quality of relationships between researchers and participants can be seen very much as dynamic as opposed to fixed, and researchers' focus and efforts to work towards relationships that function for all parties are evident in several case studies. In turn, researchers have taken steps to consider the effect of this relationship building on the status of their data and interpretations.

Researcher as reciprocal

The case study chapters illustrate how the role of the researcher in the out-of-school learning projects involved much more than the implementation of research design. Fieldwork often involved immersion into the context, and adopting a dual role that positions the researcher as 'more than'. In order to establish trust and develop relationships, researchers often found themselves involved in tasks that they may not have expected to. Cheung Judge and Blazek (Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work) describe the benefits of "putting in hours of 'hanging around' at youth clubs" as well as taking on voluntary duties; this process led both to the researchers taking on an insider identity, a "sense of familiarity, rapport, and contextual knowledge", that helped them to access richer, more nuanced, and to more "vivid" data than could otherwise have been collected. In Case Study 5 – Young Women's Residential, Clark and Laing discuss how working alongside the young people lighting the fire, cooking, and washing up was a crucial part of gaining trust, such that a meaningful 'micro-moment' happened during the tidying up of a kitchen. The researchers illustrate how this has costs for the researcher in terms of time and the level of commitment needed to undertake this reciprocal activity, which is not always factored into workload models and project plans, and may not be incentivised by current academic systems and priorities. Two of the case studies were based on secondments, which may provide the freedom for these kinds of activity to occur. Case studies also referred to the researcher engaging in 'playfulness' and how this contributed alongside 'helping out' and 'getting stuck in' to allow the researcher to be known and trusted by participant groups.

The commitment to reciprocity seen through the case studies is clearly connected to the attention to relationship building, in the sense of building a relationship on give and take. Reciprocity, however, has brought other benefits to the researchers in the case studies. One benefit is that it has helped researchers attune themselves to their participants' interests and activities and to encourage a sense of being alongside participants. A second is that it has given rise to opportunities for increased informal communication with participants that have the potential to lead to further and deeper insights than from formal research activity alone.

Researcher as becoming

The example in Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work, of Cheung Judge and Blazek investing time and effort to become insiders, resonates with other case studies in this book. It also raises some questions about the conduct and interpretation of research in this field. Berger (2015) describes some of the challenges in managing projects where a researcher moves from outsider to insider status. Berger notes that as a project progresses, and a researcher moves from outsider to insider status, then both the quality of interactions between researcher and participants, and the researcher's interpretation of those interactions, can change quite substantially. Usually, in the analysis of qualitative data, a researcher would treat a whole dataset as being similarly informative - and would, for example, go back to earlier interviews to look for evidence of themes that emerged from later interviews. However, when the researcher's sensitivity to particular nuances is changing as they become an insider, this is somewhat problematic, as interviews carried out at different stages of the project will be different in form and the researcher's newly-acquired sensitivity will bring out more information from participants in later interviews.

Bailey's 'rhizomic ethnography' in Case Study 4 – Minecraft Club, allows the researcher to follow those threads that appear to have potential for valuable research findings. Bailey made the most of this approach in his research by allowing the children in the Minecraft club to direct the course of events, and the rules of the club, almost as much as he did as the researcher and facilitator of the club. Rather than looking for themes that ran through the course of the whole series of after-school club sessions, Bailey's approach was to identify points of interest at various stages during the project where there appeared to be evidence of children's emergent literacies.

In Case Study 7 – Parents' Everyday Maths, Rose and Jay's 'emergent' design research approach in developing workshops to support parental engagement similarly allowed for some iteration in the design of the project as the research team learned more about the context they were working in and about the nature of the problem that they were trying to solve. Both Rose and Jay's and Bailey's approaches distinguish 'episodes' within the research project that are analysed relatively independently of one another. In other cases, the researchers will have had to make decisions about how to treat a data corpus where the status of the researchers, and so that of the data, has been in flux and so there will have been limits to the comparability of data from different stages of the project.

Researcher as activist

As researchers move from being objective observers to being active partners in a dialogical and relational process, as described in many of the case studies, liminal spaces are opened which can offer opportunities for action. A number of case studies in this volume report projects in which the researchers aim to change things in some way. In Case Study 8 – Democratic Engagement, Haines Lyon aimed to mediate between parents and school staff to create an ideal environment for parental

engagement in children's education. Rose and Jay aimed to empower parents to support their children's mathematics learning by working with parents to 'find the maths' in everyday life. Both projects describe transformations both of the researcher's, and of their participants'/co-researchers' perspectives as they worked together.

These examples of projects led by a 'researcher-as-activist' warrant special attention in this chapter, as they represent extreme examples of changing research contexts as projects progress and of researchers' values and beliefs being closely intertwined with the conduct and interpretations of the research and its outcomes. Nygreen (2006) draws attention to the fact that, for many educational researchers it is no longer enough to observe, describe, analyse and explain the objects of their studies; they often want to intervene and to expose and disrupt patterns of inequality and oppression. In line with Nygreen, Haines Lyon, and Rose and Jay, work to challenge a dominant discourse – that parents' role in their children's education is to work in service of the school – and experiment in different ways with their participants to find alternative ways of engaging with education. These kinds of projects highlight a particular requirement for reflexivity in this kind of research; as the researcher is so thoroughly entangled with the context they are researching, there is almost an element of autoethnography in their accounts. Several case studies describe fluctuating sites of power (e.g. Case Study 5 – Young Women's Residential, by Clark and Laing) and more democratic research engagement (e.g. Case Study 8 – Democratic Engagement, by Haines-Lyon; and Case Study 9 – Theory of Change, by Laing and Todd). While this raises some challenges, the benefit is that collaborative, participatory research approaches can, by challenging and bypassing dominant discourses, reveal their effects quite powerfully as well as providing existential proof of the possibility of alternatives.

Conclusion

The case studies in this volume raise questions about researcher positionality, including those about how best to deal with situations where position changes during the course of a project. What is clear from the examples highlighted in this chapter is that engagement with participants and the research context as a whole has given researchers access to findings and insights that would not have been possible if these researchers had acted as passive observers. Many of the projects required long periods of relationship-building and other activity to gain familiarity with the research context. This meant that researchers needed to be aware of biases and prejudices affecting the ways that they interpreted interactions and observations, and of how these may have changed as the project progressed. The extent to which researchers are able to document their positionality, and to which they are able to interrogate their own experience to assess the extent to which their interpretations have been influenced by that position, must influence our assessment of research quality. The best of these kinds of project contain almost an element of autoethnography in order to convey the researcher's experience of coming to know their participants and settings. As research on out-of-school learning continues to progress, we must continue to share ways of interrogating and communicating such reflexivity effectively.